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Object lesson: Approaching nineteenth-century swimming through the Von Hammer probate inventory

140 dozen bathing pants, 30 dozen cotton bathing gowns, 84 dozen white towels, 100 dozen rough towels, 7 life buoys, 10 life belts, 6 swimming bands and one pole, 5 flags, 4 dozen cups and saucers, 4 dozen tumblers... *Selection from inventory of "Furniture and Effects and Stock in Trade of the late F. Von Hammer, 6 February 1889."*<sup>1</sup>

Material culture, such as the miscellany of inventoried items listed above, rarely features in the rich historiography of Australian swimming. While museum exhibitions have included swimming costumes and other artefacts of aquatic cultures, and some research exists on sites such as individual baths and rock pools, most of the items once integral to those swimming locations and practices have disappeared – clothing rotted or ragged; lifesaving and instruction equipment discarded or lost.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the focus has been on areas such as organisational and competition history, stroke development, and some key personalities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Probate Records for FA Hammer [sic], Item 19/10185, Reel 3025, New South Wales State Records, Sydney.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Penny Cuthbert, curator, *Exposed: The Story of Swimwear*, 2 July-25 October 2009, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney; Marie-Louise McDermott, "Leisure, Tourism, Swimming, Sustainability and the Ocean Baths of New South Wales," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26.14 (2009): 2069-2085.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Murray G. Phillips, *Swimming Australia: One Hundred Years* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008); Gary Osmond and Murray G. Phillips, "'Look at That Kid Crawling!': Race, Myth and the 'Crawl' Stroke," *Australian Historical Studies* 37.127 (April 2006): 43-

These histories offer glimpses of swimming culture but no view out from the baths themselves, where Australian swimming cultures developed.

A detailed probate inventory of items used at Sydney's Saywell's Baths, Lady Robinson's Beach (now Brighton le Sands) in Rockdale, Botany Bay in the 1880s offers an opportunity to create such a view.<sup>4</sup> The inventory was drawn up on the death of the baths' lessee, Lieutenant Ferdinand Augustus Von Hammer.<sup>5</sup> The Danish-born Von Hammer (Figure 1) had died on 23 January 1889 at his baths, where he had resided and worked since assuming the lease in 1886. From his initial summer instructing "gentlemen and youths" at Robinson's Baths in Sydney's Domain in 1870, he had become an important figure in the development of Australian swimming culture.<sup>6</sup> Over two decades as lessee of the Ladies' Corporation (city-owned) Baths at Woolloomooloo, the Little Manly Baths and, finally, Saywell's, he taught some thousands of people to swim, organised swimming competitions and became an inaugural official of the first swimming club to be established in the colony. His family was integral to the operations of his various baths, with his wife, the Scottish-born Jane McClymont (Figure 2), and daughters offering classes for girls and women at a time when such opportunities for females, either as instructors or as pupils, were rare.

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62; Gary Osmond, "Clipped Histories: Representing the Cavill Family of Swimmers in Historical Feature Articles," *Journal of Australian Studies* 36.3 (2012): 363-76.

<sup>4</sup> The press variously referred to these baths as Saywell's Baths, Rockdale Baths and Lady Robinson's Beach Baths. For consistency, I will use Saywell's Baths.

<sup>5</sup> *Referee*, 30 January 1889, 6. While Von Hammer sometime spelled his name as 'Ferdinandt', I will use the more common spelling of his name – Ferdinand.

<sup>6</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereinafter *SMH*), 19 November 1870, 6.

Eulogised on his death as "one of our oldest professional exponents of the natatorial art", Von Hammer had been a career chameleon, a master of reinvention throughout an occupational life that traversed youthful military service in Denmark, veterinary surgery in New Zealand, swimming in Australia and a series of short-term stints as hotel manager, dance teacher and martial arts instructor in between.<sup>7</sup> He first arrived in Melbourne in 1853, likely one of the many young Danes who emigrated following the disbanding of the Danish army in Schleswig-Holstein after the first Schleswig War (1848-1851), but his whereabouts and activities from then until 1861, when he settled in New Zealand, are unclear.<sup>8</sup> In 1870, he relocated permanently to Sydney with his growing family.<sup>9</sup> Today, the Von Hammers are

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<sup>7</sup> *Referee*, 30 January 1889, 6.

<sup>8</sup> "Index to Unassisted Inward Passenger Lists to Victoria 1852-1923", B/045/003, Public Record Office Victoria, Melbourne; J. Martin, "Danes," in *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, its People and their Origins*, ed., James Jupp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 252. Von Hammer arrived in Sydney in 1858 and advertised dancing lessons in Melbourne in 1861, claiming to have recently toured India: *Argus*, 26 April 1858, 4; *Empire*, 30 April 1858, 3; *Argus*, 2 October 1861, 8. Von Hammer was naturalised in New Zealand effective from 23 January 1861: [http://www.austlii.edu.au/nz/legis/hist\\_act/na186428v1864n12308.pdf](http://www.austlii.edu.au/nz/legis/hist_act/na186428v1864n12308.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Von Hammer had married Jane McClymont in 1863: New Zealand Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, marriage certificate, registration number 1863004651. Their children were New Zealand-born Selina Jane (Lina), Amelia Victorina, Johanna Andrea, Clarissa Catherina and Otto Christian; the youngest, Ferdinand Augustus (Gus) and Fritz Harold (Fred), were born in Sydney.

remembered only briefly in a few local Sydney-based histories.<sup>10</sup> The probate inventory therefore offers an opportunity not only to explore his neglected legacy but also, more productively, to extend understandings of Australian swimming and aquatic recreation in the 1870s and 1880s via material culture.<sup>11</sup> The comprehensive list of his "Furniture and Effects and Stock in Trade" covers the baths as well as the family's private quarters; in addition to itemising the contents of the sitting room, bedroom, kitchen and wash house, it enumerates objects found in the baths – both the men's and ladies' 'Bath-Bars', waiting room, refreshment room and store room. The listed items range from the quotidian (twenty-four assorted spoons) to the anachronistic (six swimming bands and one pole) to the mind-boggling (140 dozen bathing pants).

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<sup>10</sup> Von Hammer is not mentioned in the major works on NSW swimming history. In local histories, Darby offers the most thorough coverage: Garry Darby, *Baths and Boatsheds: The Waterfront Community at Sans Souci, 1895-1965* (Sydney: self-published, 2014), 1-14. See also: R.W. Rathbone, *Brighton Le Sands: The Suburb That Grew from the Sand Hills* (Sydney: Rockdale City Library, 2000), 34. The *Dictionary of Sydney* website has brief entries for both Ferdinand and his wife, Jane Von Hammer, but only the entry for Jane refers to swimming baths: "von Hammer, Jane," *Dictionary of Sydney*, accessed 18 March 2015, [http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/person/von\\_hammer\\_jane](http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/person/von_hammer_jane). The Dictionary also refers to Ferdinand's involvement with the Little Manly Baths: John MacRitchie, "Little Manly Baths," *Dictionary of Sydney*, accessed 18 March 2015, [http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/little\\_manly\\_baths](http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/little_manly_baths).

<sup>11</sup> Phillips offers the best treatment of colonial swimming and swimming baths in this period: *Swimming Australia*, 3-21, 101-29.

The Von Hammer probate inventory is a rarity. Few, if any, prominent baths proprietors died at their workplace, surrounded by their tools of trade which were then carefully counted, valued and documented. The more famous Sydney swimming 'professor' Frederick Cavill, for instance, died decades after retirement and far from his former baths. The inventory is also as valuable as it is rare; while the total worth of the individual items was determined to be eighty-two pounds only at the time, its value today as a historical and cultural document is much more significant.

The probate list is most valuable as a portal, or object lesson, onto the culture and practices of Sydney swimming baths in the late nineteenth century. Bathing and swimming in Sydney was so vastly different in its particulars from today. Imagining and recreating the hive of sometimes intense, serious and purposeful activity (swimming instruction and life-saving) and other times joyful, hedonistic and sensual pursuits (bobbing on the swell, taking tea in the refreshment rooms, people watching from the sunny platforms), requires a focus for our attention and imaginations. No accounts exist of the baths in oral histories or memoirs written by locals or by visitors, and neither Von Hammer himself nor his heirs left written descriptions. Newspapers are a key source, but direct coverage is limited to advertisements and special events, with only occasional description of day-to-day activities. Von Hammer's probate inventory, with its fabulous melange and quantity of items, points us to particular objects that invite scrutiny and interpretation of their cultural, social and economic context.

### **Extending a Materiality Approach**

The probate inventory could be approached in various ways. As a physical document viewed in the context of the full probate record, the list could offer insight into state regimes of

taxation, legal mechanisms surrounding death and inheritance and archival processes.

Alternatively, the listed goods themselves could be the direct focus of study. While the actual objects have long since disappeared, it would be possible to assemble and study replica items such as life buoys and swimming costumes held in museums. In this study, however, I will engage with the spectral inventoried articles not only to offer insight into swimming culture but also to extend the possibilities of a material culture approach.

A material culture approach in the absence of the objects under consideration might appear to be problematic. More typically, historians approach material artefacts as "alternative sources" to complement written documentary evidence where physically extant objects not only convey meaning but also are considered as meaningful in themselves.<sup>12</sup> An alternative approach to material culture, however, involves objects that may no longer exist but which are represented by inclusion in a written document. Most typically, this involves the "numeric aggregation of probate inventory or trade data presence".<sup>13</sup> Numerous examples

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<sup>12</sup> Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry, "Introduction: Material Culture Studies: A Reactionary View," in *Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, ed., Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3; Giorgio Riello, "Things That Shape History: Material Culture and Historical Narratives," in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed., Karen Harvey, (London: Routledge, 2009), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Sara Pennell, "Mundane Materiality, or, Should Small Things Still Be Forgotten? Material Culture, Micro-Histories and the Problem of Scale," in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed., Karen Harvey (London: Routledge, 2009), 176.

exist of large-scale studies based on probate inventory or trade data to explore social and economic history.<sup>14</sup>

Material culture studies based on probate inventories have been critiqued on various grounds. Inventories can be incomplete, vague or unclear, with even seemingly simple words varying in meaning from location to location, and they can decontextualise items from their personal or social meaning and use.<sup>15</sup> Each of these concerns applies to the Von Hammer probate list. It is no doubt incomplete: a fire at the baths eighteen months earlier had partially destroyed the family's residence, and some items may not have been replaced.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Ferdinand had been dying of liver cancer for some time, and his family probably removed some valuable items to the homes of their adult daughters during that time to escape the creditors and prepare for their future (a stuffed bird remained in the sitting room, for instance,

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<sup>14</sup> For a recent example of a study based on probate inventories, see Maria Hayward, "A Shadow of a Former Self: Analysis of an Early Seventeenth-Century Boy's Doublet from Abingdon," in *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and Its Meanings*, ed., Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 107-18. For an example of a trade data study, see: Emily Cain, "Customs Collection and Dutiable Goods: Lake Ontario Ports, 1801-1812," *Fresh Water* 2.2 (1987): 22-27.

<sup>15</sup> For useful discussion of these issues, see: Richard Grassby, "Material Culture and Cultural History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35.4 (Spring 2005): 598; Nancy Cox, "Objects of Worth, Objects of Desire: Toward a Dictionary of Traded Goods and Commodities, 1550-1800," *Material History Review* 39 (Spring 1994): 29-30.

<sup>16</sup> *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* (hereinafter *SM*), 11 June 1887, 1,211.

but no jewellery is listed).<sup>17</sup> Not all terms are clear: while the distinction between rough and white towels infers differences in quality, and hire-price, a simple descriptor like 'cotton bathing gowns' obscures precise meaning and gendered use. Items are also decontextualised: some prior knowledge and inference is required as the listed items do not specify their actual purpose.

These are all acceptable limitations for this study. The list, while presenting a single case, is sufficiently comprehensive to offer a picture of swimming culture. I am not concerned with the inventory of personal items, which is more likely to be incomplete given the circumstances just described. Likewise, vagueness of description and the lack of assigned value for each individual item pose no great problem because my concern is less with the objects themselves and more with their practical and cultural context. And while the listing of items without description of their use does require some inference, there is nothing strange, unknown or unknowable on the inventory that might risk a false association being made.

The approach taken here will be to view the objects as representations of both the swimming past and as social artefacts integral to the occupational life of the Von Hammer family, both at Saywell's Baths and at their previous Sydney swimming establishments. Just as historians assign different narrative values to objects themselves depending on context, I will explore the links between listed objects, Von Hammer and late nineteenth-century

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<sup>17</sup> Historians have remarked on this practice in critiquing probate records as evidence: see D.G. Vaisey, "Introduction," in *Probate Inventories of Litchfield and District 1568–1680*, ed., D.G. Vaisey, (Stafford, Staffordshire Record Society, 1969), 4-5. For a report on Von Hammer's illness, see *Referee*, 9 January 1889, 8.



swimming through three inter-related narrative lenses: life-saving, swimming instruction and entertainment.<sup>18</sup>

### **Life-saving – seven life buoys, ten life belts, two canvas stretchers**

Saywell's Baths, which opened in 1886, was a commodious open-air sea baths in Botany Bay with two separate men's and women's enclosures of roughly 300 square feet each and water depths of nine to fourteen feet (Figure 3). A slatted iron barrier enclosed the perimeter, protecting bathers from most passing sea creatures, but the size and depth of the water posed other hazards. At such a facility, equipment like the inventoried life buoys and life belts were necessities. In newspaper descriptions, the buoys and belts are hung at various places around the baths to reassure prospective bathers.<sup>19</sup> The stretchers were also important: people did drown at baths, and regularly got into trouble. Von Hammer had tragic experience of this in 1875 when he was called upon to dive in search of a swimmer's body at the Corporation Baths in the Domain.<sup>20</sup> Not all of the family's encounters with drowning clients ended as badly, however. Von Hammer had saved a man at Foley's Baths, Woolloomooloo and at

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<sup>18</sup> Riello, "Things That Shape History," 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> *SM*, 18 December 1886, 28; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 31 December 1887, 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Illawarra Mercury*, 8 Jan 1875, 2; for another drowning, see *Evening News* (hereinafter *EN*), 27 May 1876, 5.

Saywell's Baths his sons and daughters frequently rescued swimmers using the life-saving equipment.<sup>21</sup>

Von Hammer considered life belts and life buoys for floatation a necessity for anybody even remotely likely to encounter water: "Squatters, stockmen, diggers and commercial travellers, as well as yachtsmen, should never be without a swimming belt", he advertised.<sup>22</sup> As a sideline to swimming, he repaired and hired boats, and made, sold and rented both life belts and buoys.<sup>23</sup> These life-saving tools were not only practical necessities but also emblematic of the serious purpose of swimming in this era. Von Hammer's own ads starkly presented the alternatives – "swimming versus drowning" – and extolled the benefits of taking lessons: "Swimming – so desirable, so necessary"; this "invaluable art"; and this "useful art".<sup>24</sup>

Von Hammer's military background influenced his approach to swimming as a life-saving skill. Born in 1830 in Copenhagen to district commissioner and inspector Frederik Abel Hammer and his wife, Elisabeth Kirstine (née Lemvigh), by the age of twenty

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<sup>21</sup> *EN*, 9 December 1880, 2; *Singleton Argus*, 7 January 1888, 2; *EN*, 20 December 1887, 6; In 1893, following the rescue of two women by one of the Misses Von Hammer, the *Referee* noted that she had saved "hundreds of lives" at Saywell's Baths: 14 June 1893, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *SMH*, 17 February 1877, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *SMH*, 5 February 1877, 1; 17 February 1877, 3; *SMH*, 19 December 1878, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *SMH*, 24 December 1873, 2; *SMH*, 2 February 1874, 1; *SMH*, 10 January 1877, 1; *SMH*, 8 February 1886, 2.

Ferdinand was an infantry lieutenant.<sup>25</sup> His older brother, Otto Christian, was a decorated naval officer who served in both Schleswig Wars.<sup>26</sup> A military influence on Von Hammer's aquatic practices should not be surprising, as swimming was promoted and taught by European armies in the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> European military links to Australian swimming

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<sup>25</sup> His daughters indicated that he was born on 20 December 1831 (see *SMH*, 29 January 1916, 16) but it is more likely that he was born one year earlier as Danish baptism records state that he was baptised in February 1831: "Denmark, Baptisms, 1618-1923," index, *FamilySearch*, accessed 22 December 2014, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XYF3-DHF>. For a brief biography of his father, in Danish, see S.A. Sørensen, "Hammer, Frederik Abel", Project Runeberg, Dansk Biografisk Lexikon, accessed 17 March 2015, <http://runeberg.org/dbl/6/0532.html>. While Ferdinand used the honorific title 'Von' in Australia and New Zealand, Danish records for the family do not include this title. For his military service, see: "D3178, Frederiksborg county, Lynge-Kronborg parish, Asminderød, census year 1850," *Danish Demographic Database*, accessed 22 December 2014, [http://www.ddd.dda.dk/asp/vishusstand\\_en.asp](http://www.ddd.dda.dk/asp/vishusstand_en.asp). Von Hammer's daughters claimed that he served in the first Schleswig War, but this has not been corroborated: *SMH*, 29 January 1916, 16.

<sup>26</sup> "Otto Christian Hammer", Wikipedia, accessed 3 November 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto\\_Christian\\_Hammer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_Christian_Hammer).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen, *The Springboard in the Pond: An Intimate History of the Swimming Pool* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 21, 27-31. Swimming was also part of the GutsMuths system of physical education in Danish and others European schools in the early nineteenth century: Roland Naul, "History of Sport and Physical Education in Germany,

in this period are not well researched, but they were not insignificant. Acclaimed 'professor' of swimming, Frederick Cavill, who arrived in Sydney a decade after Von Hammer, had also had a naval career before migrating to Sydney, and served as paymaster of the NSW Naval Artillery Volunteers.<sup>28</sup> The notion of swimming as one of a number of "water defences", developed by the Victorians against their dread of water, helps contextualise the legitimacy of military men as swimming instructors.<sup>29</sup> Von Hammer fitted the bill. Not only had he served in the Danish infantry, but he also claimed to have been "Superintendent of the Transport of Horses in the Honorable East India Company's Service".<sup>30</sup> In New Zealand, where he lived in Invercargill between 1861 and 1870, he had drawn on his military background to promote his equine veterinary practice, advise on mounted escorts for miners travelling from the Lake Wakatip gold diggings, run livery stables, give equestrian lessons, and operate a hotel with a room for instruction in fencing and other armed combat (a "*salon des assaults des arms*").<sup>31</sup>

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1800-1945," in *Sport and Physical Education in Germany*, ed., Roland Naul and Ken Hardman (London: Routledge, 2005), 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Illustrated Sydney News*, 9 May 1885, 11. Cavill began to teach in Sydney in 1880: *SMH*, 9 October 1880, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Vybarr Cregan-Reid, "Water Defences: *The Arts of Swimming* in Nineteenth-Century Culture," *Critical Survey* 16.3 (September 2004): 33-47. Urbain extends on the notion of swimming teacher as protector not only from the pupil's fears but also from their own inhibitions: Jean-Didier Urbain, *At the Beach*, trans. Catherine Porter (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 87.

<sup>30</sup> *Lake Wakatip Mail*, 30 May 1863, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Southland Times*, 16 December 1862, 2; *Southland Times*, 30 November 1866, 1.

On arrival in Sydney, he initially combined swimming instruction with a variety of other activities, including dancing, gymnastics and the martial arts of horsemanship and fencing, claiming to be a "Member of the Royal College of Arms, Gymnastics, Dancing, and Royal Hippodrome, Copenhagen".<sup>32</sup> Allied with the newly established Sydney School of Arms, he offered lessons in "fencing, cavalry sword exercise, bayonet fencing and swimming in the air [presumably gymnastics]".<sup>33</sup>

These non-aquatic activities helped him establish a clientele and support his family during the winter months, when weather effectively halted swimming instruction. Increasingly he focussed on swimming at the expense of these other activities, but would draw upon his background to supplement his income. In the 1875/76 swimming season, for example, when he realised he had overbid for the lease on the Ladies' Corporation Baths, he again offered lessons across a range of martial arts – "riding a la etiquette and a la militaire; Fencing with bayonet, foils, singlesticks, and cavalry sword exercise".<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *SMH*, 25 February 1871, 5. Elsewhere, he claimed to be a member of the "Royal College of Gymnastics and Swimming, Copenhagen": *SMH*, 19 November 1870, 6. He also advertised himself as a former "pupil of the Royal Balletmaster, Bournoville [sic], of Copenhagen": *SMH*, 23 January 1871, 8; see also *Argus*, 2 October 1861, 8. August Bournonville was a Danish ballet master and choreographer. Given Von Hammer's propensity and career-need for self-promotion, there can be no certainty that he actually trained with Bournonville.

<sup>33</sup> *SMH*, 10 June 1871, 6. The School, which opened in mid-1870, was located in the Café de Paris in King Street: *SMH*, 15 August 1870, 4).

<sup>34</sup> *SMH*, 24 December 1875, 10.

Von Hammer also capitalised on his military background to further his career as baths' lessee and swimming instructor. In his unsuccessful application to obtain the lease for the Dawes' Point Baths in 1871 for both swimming and gymnastics lessons, among the arguments he advanced were the benefits for "our [Sydney] Volunteers and Military".<sup>35</sup> He regularly used the title 'Lieutenant' in advertising his services as a swimming teacher, and asserted in advertisements that he was an appointee of the Military Technical School in Sydney.<sup>36</sup> And in 1886 he advertised himself as Lieutenant, as the "greatest teacher of the age" and as "ex Swimming Master General of the Polar Ship Vega, under the famous Captain Nordenskjöld", claiming to have swum "from Spitsbergen to Kamschatka; fact, he didn't turn back".<sup>37</sup> Given that the *Vega*'s Arctic journey of scientific discovery occurred in 1878, while Von Hammer was living in Sydney, and that Nordenskjöld's accomplishment was well-known to Sydney-siders who followed world events, this patently false claim must be seen as an example of humorous self-promotion that relied on public knowledge of Von Hammer's military credentials for meaning.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "Letter, F. Von Hammer [to Sydney Municipal Council] 25 September 1871", City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 26: 111/1047.

<sup>36</sup> *SMH*, 27 September 1873, 4; *SMH*, 23 December 1875, 10; *SMH*, 29 November 1876, 1; *SMH*, 3 September 1880, 1.

<sup>37</sup> *SMH*, 8 February 1886, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Nordenskjöld's death was widely reported. See, for example, *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 24 August 1901, 41.

The military influences are also seen in his early swimming instruction, which was aimed at conveying life-saving skills, including basic floating.<sup>39</sup> His advanced classes included instruction on how to save a drowning person and how to manage a horse while crossing a river; while the latter might appear to be an unusual skill for an urban dweller, that very same month in Sydney a young man drowned while bathing a horse.<sup>40</sup> Undressing under water was considered another essential life-saving skill, and he taught this in six lessons.<sup>41</sup>

To enhance his credentials, Von Hammer exhibited various military-hued routines at swimming carnivals. He and an unnamed Danish compatriot conducted a mimic combat with spears on a raft while dressed as Roman soldiers at an Easter carnival, for example, and at the same event Von Hammer performed acts that were redolent of military practice:

... he loaded and discharged his gun on several occasions while floating listlessly on the surface of the water; and afterwards, with the utmost *sang froid* divested himself of his boots and clothing, making the latter into neat bundles, which he threw ashore. He kept the firearm from becoming damp by contact with the water by the exercise of great caution and dexterity.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> SMH, 29 November 1876, 1.

<sup>40</sup> SMH, 21 December 1871, 5. Military baths in Europe in the 1800s trained horses along with soldiers, and Von Hammer was no doubt very familiar with instructing horses in water: van Leeuwen, *The Springboard in the Pond*, 31.

<sup>41</sup> SMH, 2 February 1874, 1; see advertisements also in SMH, 8 February 1876, 3; SMH, 29 November 1876, 1.

<sup>42</sup> SMH, 2 April 1872, 5.

Apparently he demonstrated this regularly, as it was described as his "great gun trick" when he performed it at another carnival eight years later.<sup>43</sup>

Life-saving remained a fundamental underlying justification for Von Hammer's swimming instruction, but over time the militaristic dimensions waned as he established himself as a swimming master and leased larger baths. By the time he took charge of Saywell's Baths in 1886, his emphasis had broadened to encompass facility management, recreational swimming and stroke instruction.

**Swimming instruction – 140 dozen bathing pants, thirty dozen cotton bathing gowns, eighty-four dozen white towels, one hundred dozen rough towels, six swimming bands and one pole**

At the gate to Saywell's Baths, patrons paid their entry – four pennies for ladies, three for men – and perhaps hired bathing pants or a bathing gown and a towel and headed to one of the ninety-seven changing rooms lining the sides.<sup>44</sup> The sizable stock of 1,700 bathing trunks, 360 bathing gowns and 2,200 towels of varying quality may seem incredible today, but this sideline rental business indicates both the growing popularity of swimming and the fact that few people owned their own bathing gear. Von Hammer had advertised "superior" towels and bathing dresses at his ladies' baths in 1875 and other Sydney bathing facilities, including the Redfern Baths, Balmain Corporation Baths and the indoor Natatorium on Pitt Street, also

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<sup>43</sup> *EN*, 6 March 1880, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *EN*, 8 November 1887, 1. The cost to hire men's bathing pants was one penny: see *EN*, 21 October 1887, 1.



followed this practice in the 1880s.<sup>45</sup> Advertisements in Sydney newspapers indicate the availability of these goods, which were obviously bought wholesale by baths lessees.<sup>46</sup> The volume of garments also attests to the labour-intensive nature of bathing establishments (Von Hammer's probate inventory also lists washing and wringing machines) and the complexity of management beyond imparting life-saving skills.

Von Hammer previously had learned about the business risks of baths management at great cost. During his first eleven summers in Sydney he taught swimming at Robinson's Baths in the Domain, but did not manage the premises.<sup>47</sup> He was determined to obtain his own lease, tendering unsuccessfully for the Dawes' Point Corporation Baths in 1871 and for the Gentlemen's Corporation Baths at Woolloomooloo in 1873.<sup>48</sup> In 1875 he obtained the leasehold for the Ladies' Corporation Baths in the Domain. His wife and daughters

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<sup>45</sup> *SMH*, 23 December 1875, 10; *SMH*, 12 October 1887, 2; *Balmain Observer and Western Suburbs Advertiser*, 15 January 1887, 1; *EN*, 8 November 1887, 1.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Gowing Brothers sold "bathing pants" (*SM*, 17 November 1883, 936), Thompson and Giles advertised both "swimming costumes" and "swimming pants" (*Australian Town and Country Journal*, 8 October 1887, 43) and Peapes and Shaw offered a range of towels (*SM*, 19 January 1878, 67).

<sup>47</sup> *SMH*, 3 September 1880, 1.

<sup>48</sup> "Letter, F. Von Hammer [to Sydney Municipal Council] 22 December 1871", City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 26: 113/004; "Letter, F. Von Hammer [to Sydney Municipal Council] 19 July 1873", City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 26: 122/753. Von Hammer's 1873 tender was initially accepted, but for reasons unknown he did not take up, or ultimately was not awarded, the lease: *SMH*, 23 July 1873, 2.

instructed, while he continued to teach swimming at Robinson's during the day and gave private lessons for men and youths in the evening at his ladies' facility.<sup>49</sup> After the first successful season, however, Von Hammer ran into financial trouble, writing to the City Council "that I find I have given too much for the Ladies Corporation baths, more than I am able to pay", and requesting a reduction in his annual rent from 150 to 125 pounds.<sup>50</sup> Although his stated reasons in this and in subsequent appeals appeared to be reasonable – his was an unprecedented annual rent; the facilities were dilapidated; low tide restricted swimming hours; and a smallpox outbreak in the summer of 1877 greatly reduced attendance – Council refused his request.<sup>51</sup> He struggled on for a season, attempting to increase revenues through additional entrepreneurial efforts.<sup>52</sup> His troubles worsened, however, and by mid-1877 his estate was sequestered, his towels and bathing dresses were repossessed by the seller, he was declared insolvent and his lease was resumed.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *SMH*, 23 December 1875, 10; *SMH*, 14 March 1876, 8.

<sup>50</sup> "Letter, F. Von Hammer [to Sydney Municipal Council] 18 July 1876", City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 26: 140/412.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* – the refusal was appended to this letter, dated 20 July 1876. See also "Letter, F. Von Hammer [to Sydney Municipal Council] 6 June 1877", City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 26: 145/597.

<sup>52</sup> *SMH*, 29 November 1876, 1; *SMH*, 17 February 1877, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *EN*, 22 May 1877, 3; "Letter, F. Von Hammer [to Sydney Municipal Council] 6 June 1877", City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 26: 145/597; *SMH*, 14 June 1877, 9; *SMH*, 30 June 1877, 8. State Records NSW Insolvency Index, File No.: 13446.

Despite this, Von Hammer continued to teach swimming at the Domain and in 1880 obtained the lease for the newly completed Little Manly Baths.<sup>54</sup> His strong reputation as an instructor, the abilities and experience of his wife and daughters, and undoubtedly sympathy for his situation at the Ladies' Corporation Baths, overcame any concerns about his managerial capacity. In six successive seasons at Manly he cemented that reputation, and in 1886 he became lessee of the new Saywell's Baths.<sup>55</sup>

Although Von Hammer's experience with the Ladies' Corporation Baths was financially disastrous, ultimately it shored up the family's swimming investment by bringing Jane Von Hammer and the couple's four daughters into the business along with their three sons. In his successful bid for the ladies' baths in 1875, Ferdinand enlisted the skills of his female family members: "I am married and have daughters qualified to assist and superintend".<sup>56</sup> By "qualified", he appears to have meant that they were capable swimmers whom he could train; he later explained that they had been "expert swimmers [who] eventually adapted to give instruction".<sup>57</sup> From 1875 onwards, the female Von Hammers were active participants in the family business, teaching "swimming, floating and diving" daily at their "Sydney Ladies Swimming School" and organising what they deemed to be the

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<sup>54</sup> *SMH*, 23 December 1880; Manly Council Minutes, 31 July 1879, 221; Manly Council Minutes, 23 December 1880, 339.

<sup>55</sup> *SMH*, 1 October 1886, 10.

<sup>56</sup> "Letter, F. Von Hammer [to Sydney Municipal Council] 15 September 1875", City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 26: 135/642.

<sup>57</sup> "Letter, F. Von Hammer [to Sydney Municipal Council] 6 June 1877", City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 26: 145/597.

"first ladies' swimming matches" in the colony in 1876.<sup>58</sup> The performances of the Von Hammer daughters in that event helped garner publicity, and when the family assumed the lease of Saywell's Baths they billed the ladies' section as being "under the immediate management of Mrs. H. [*sic*] Von Hammer and her four celebrated daughters", whom they shrewdly but misleadingly promoted as "Lady Champion Swimmers of New South Wales".<sup>59</sup> This extent of female involvement in a swimming business was unprecedented in Sydney. A Mrs. Biggs had managed baths in the Domain in the 1830s, but female instruction by wives and daughters of prominent baths' lessees did not become commonplace until after the Von Hammers; Theophila Cavill and her daughters Madeleine, Fredda and Alice in the 1880s are the most prominent.<sup>60</sup>

The swimming abilities of the entire Von Hammer family prepared them to manage Saywell's Baths. Mrs Von Hammer's Sunday morning ladies' classes were reportedly the most popular.<sup>61</sup> Her method of instruction is unknown, but newspapers publicised

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<sup>58</sup> *SMH*, 20 January 1876, 6 – costs given; *SMH*, 21 March 1876, 5; report *SMH*, 22 March 1876, 9; *SMH*, 5 September 1876, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *EN*, 21 October 1887, 1. At this stage there were no female swimming championships.

<sup>60</sup> *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 5 October 1837, 2. Other included "Mrs Mitchell", wife of the foreman at the natatorium, who was hired by the Sydney Bathing Company to teach women at the Natatorium in 1889: see *Referee*, 9 October 1889, 4; *Referee*, 5 March 1890, 8. For the Cavills, see: Gary Osmond, "Swimming her own Course: Agency in the Professional Swimming Career of Alice Cavill," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 29.3 (March 2012): 385-402.

<sup>61</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 31 December 1887, 28.

Ferdinand's methods and contextualised the inventoried pole (Figure 4) and swimming bands:

In the first place the pupil is taught to balance himself in the water with a cork belt secured with a rope running through an iron fork fastened to a pole. The pole is held by the teacher, who stands upon a bridge extending some forty feet into the water, and the pupil is then taught all the motions used in Swimming. As soon as he becomes efficient in these exercises a calico belt is supplied, the pupil (still being supported by the teacher) ... [As] soon as he can swim say a hundred feet in regular stroke, with arms and legs together, he is compelled to swim for his certificate as a plain swimmer, over a distance of 400 feet, without resting and without the aid of a belt.<sup>62</sup>

Von Hammer was a proponent of the breaststroke, but would also have taught the more popular racing style – the side stroke. The trudgeon stroke and the crawl stroke were not yet known.<sup>63</sup>

As with the ladies' carnival in 1876, Von Hammer regularly organised men's swimming competitions. These early prototypes for swimming contests were designed to

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<sup>62</sup> *SMH*, 21 December 1871, 5. According to this article, this system was reportedly "similar to that used in all the swimming schools of Northern Germany, Denmark, Sweden, etc."

Frederick Cavill used a similar method, attaching the novice swimmer to the on-land instructor via a looped line: *EN*, 21 March 1881, 3; Frederick Cavill, *How to Learn to Swim* (Sydney: Caxton Printing Office, 1884), 3. Mrs Von Hammer demonstrated her methods in four stages in March 1876 but no details of these were given: see *SMH*, 22 March 1876, 9.

<sup>63</sup> *Referee*, 30 January 1889, 6.

publicise his schools and methods, and many involved his pupils.<sup>64</sup> Four years before the first swimming club was established in NSW, Von Hammer and James Quig, manager of the Men's Corporation Baths, had unsuccessfully attempted to muster interest in establishing such a group. In 1880, Von Hammer was elected to the committee of the inaugural Port Jackson Swimming Club and selected as its first swimming master.<sup>65</sup>

Von Hammer's combined efforts in teaching swimming, organising competition and nurturing swimming clubs helped advance swimming in NSW, but they were also inextricably tied to his entrepreneurial zeal and need to maintain a livelihood. In order to rent and recycle those thousands of towels and trunks, and to keep the business operative, Von Hammer needed to attract not only serious swimmers but also recreational bathers for a "dip in the briny".<sup>66</sup> For this, he needed special attractions and enticements.

### **Entertainment – five flags, four dozen cups and saucers, four dozen tumblers**

Saywell's Baths was unique among Australian swimming baths, both geographically and commercially, in that it was located at a purpose-built seaside resort planned by Sydney entrepreneur Thomas Saywell as part of the New Brighton Estate, an ambitious real estate development at Rockdale that included residential building lots, a private tramline, a grand

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<sup>64</sup> *EN*, 30 March 1872, 3; *SMH*, 11 March 1876, 2.

<sup>65</sup> *SMH*, 11 March 1876, 2; *SMH*, 15 December 1879, 5; *SMH*, 23 December 1879, 5; *SMH*, 14 February 1880, 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Referee*, 1 March 1888, 8.

hotel and the sea baths (Figure 5). The baths officially opened on 2 October 1886.<sup>67</sup>

Commanding a view of the bay, Sydney Heads and Kurnell, the historic landing spot of Captain James Cook in 1770, the baths and adjacent New Brighton Hotel aimed to attract not only Sydney-siders, who could arrive either by rail from the city in twenty minutes or by steamer, but also out-of-towners. One advertisement targeted country businessmen and their families: "Pater can go into the city after breakfast, leaving mater and the little ones to enjoy themselves at the Baths, on the beautiful Sandy Beach, or fishing, returning to them for Evening Dinner, having done his business".<sup>68</sup>

While Von Hammer's baths differed from the various city bathing sites clustered mainly around Woolloomooloo harbour and the Domain in that it was part of a new and popular resort development, all baths lessees needed to maximise attendance in order to increase their incomes. The flags and crockery listed in Von Hammer's estate had their specific practical functions, but are also emblematic of the entertainment dimension of baths, related to but separate from swimming and life-saving instruction.

The flags noted in Von Hammer's probate inventory fluttered atop the cupolas on the two small buildings that flanked the baths' entrance and from the dressing shed rooves on either side (Figure 3). The actual flags flown are not identifiable, but as cheerful pennants they served to welcome customers to this aquatic attraction. Other visitors remained on the beach, patronised the hotel, or, as seen in Figure 3, rode horses along the shore. The inviting entrance and sparkling, supervised waters within immediately helped attract patrons to

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<sup>67</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 27 December 1884, 11; *SM*, 18 December 1886, 28; *SMH*, 4 October 1886, 4; Rathbone, *Brighton Le Sands*, 32-34.

<sup>68</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 10 September 1887, 46.

Saywell's resort. Public holidays were particularly popular times; 8,000 people reportedly travelled by rail alone to bathe at the baths and beach on the Prince of Wales' birthday holiday in November 1886.<sup>69</sup> In late 1887, Von Hammer secured a four-year tenure on the basis of his first successful year, and the large quantity of towels and garments for hire in his possession two years after opening attests to the continued popularity of the enterprise.<sup>70</sup>

While the New Brighton Hotel offered a public bar and a coffee shop, Von Hammer also advertised "first-class refreshments on the premises" in order to extend his business appeal.<sup>71</sup> The refreshment room occupied one of the two flag-bedecked buildings at the entrance to the baths; the family resided in the other.<sup>72</sup> The four dozen cups and saucers, four dozen tumblers and unspecified "quantity of odd crockery" listed in his probate inventory suggests that the café was a modest enterprise only, busiest on swimming carnival days when it was customary to serve refreshments.<sup>73</sup> After Ferdinand's death, Jane assumed the lease and continued to run the baths until 1895; the listing for the baths in the *Sands Directory* in this period of management included "refreshment rooms", suggesting an increased focus on this dimension of the business.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *SM*, 18 December 1886, 28.

<sup>70</sup> *EN*, 29 September 1887, 8.

<sup>71</sup> *EN*, 21 October 1887, 1.

<sup>72</sup> *SM*, 18 December 1886, 28.

<sup>73</sup> *Newcastle Chronicle*, 21 March 1876, 3.

<sup>74</sup> The widowed Jane (c. 1833-1911) managed the baths first with the help of her eldest son, Otto, until his death in 1893, and then with assistance from youngest son Fritz and one of his sisters, believed to have been Johnna: Death Certificate; *Referee*, 6 September 1893, 8; *SMH*,



To recreationally complement the refreshment rooms, Von Hammer offered a number of aquatic diversions over the years. At the Ladies' Corporation Baths, he had created an "aquatic gymnasium" complete with swings, and patrons could hire sailboats.<sup>75</sup> At Saywell's, he installed diving boards as an attraction for adept swimmers; diffident bathers and children could enjoy the small section of sandy beach that remained exposed at high tide.<sup>76</sup> The range of activities available, aquatic and otherwise, suggests the developing complexity of bathing culture in Sydney as baths managers moved from a sole focus on the practical skills of swimming instruction to a wider business model that encompassed other services and attractions.

## Conclusion

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19 March 1894, 8; *Sands Sydney, Suburban and Country Commercial Directory 1891-95*, City of Sydney Archives, accessed 18 March 2015, <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/sands-directory>. Marking an extraordinary career for a woman in this period, the 63-year-old Jane Von Hammer then obtained the lease for the Sans Souci Tidal Baths in 1897, which she ran with her sons until 1900 when the two young men enlisted in the Boer War (Darby, *Baths and Boatsheds*, 11). For a history of the Sans Souci baths, including the Von Hammers' involvement, see Darby, *Baths and Boatsheds*.

<sup>75</sup> *SMH*, 29 November 1876, 1; *SMH*, 17 February 1877, 3. None of these items was listed in the probate inventory; presumably they no longer existed.

<sup>76</sup> *SM*, 18 December 1886, 28.

The probate inventory was created to determine the net value of Von Hammer's estate, with debts deducted from total assets of which his inventoried effects constituted only a portion.<sup>77</sup>

The immediate effect of these determinations was to allow his widow to continue to manage the baths, but the longer-term result was the creation of this rare probate document that helps expose his baths to view more than a century later. The objects may no longer exist, but as items on an inventory they are nonetheless useful material artefacts that have enabled a reading of the baths, their manager and the culture of Sydney swimming in the 1870s and 1880s. This reading has focussed on life-saving, teaching and entertainment dimensions of the bathing business, raising links with militarism, entrepreneurship, urban development, gendered opportunities and leisure, among other themes, and extending knowledge of Von Hammer and a neglected sphere of Australian history.

Each of these inter-related facets of bathing culture deserves greater attention than can be offered here. The economy of baths management is one example. The tally of debts in Von Hammer's probate papers offers some insight into the business of operating a large swimming baths. Ten pounds were owed for advertising, presumably to newspapers, of which Von Hammer was a steady client. Small debts, all totalling less than four pounds, were also owed to grocers, bakers, milk suppliers, labourers and for other unspecified "goods". Such transactions, along with Von Hammer's correspondence with the Sydney municipal council about rents, the entry fees for the baths and the cost of hiring various garments, offer the opportunity for a deeper economic and entrepreneurial analysis. This study has instead focussed on cultural and social dimensions, but it suggests the possibilities for extending the

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<sup>77</sup> For Von Hammer's Last Will and Testament, see: Probate packet 13660, Container 17/2283, Item Series 3-17895, New South Wales State Records, Sydney.

Gary Osmond, "Object lesson: Approaching Nineteenth-Century Swimming Through the Von Hammer Probate Inventory". *Journal of Australian Studies*. Vol. 40, No. 3, 2016, 337-352. Published online 3 August 2016 DOI: 10.1080/14443058.2016.1199584.

scope of a material culture lens to read the history of Australian swimming and other physical cultures.



Figure 1. Ferdinand Augustus Von Hammer. Courtesy of Jill Murray.



Figure 2. Jane Von Hammer (née McClymont). Courtesy of Jill Murray.



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Figure 3. Saywell's Baths, Rockdale in 1886. Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser, 18 December 1886, 28S. Courtesy of State Library of New South Wales. For another image of these baths, seen from the balcony of the New Brighton Hotel, see Australian Town and Country Journal, 31 December 1887, 26.

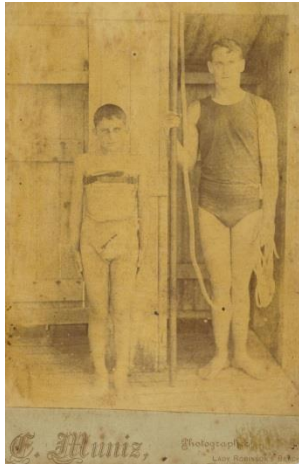


Figure 4. Gus (left) and Fred Von Hammer at Saywell's Baths. Fred is holding a pole and line used for swimming instruction. Courtesy of Jill Murray.



Figure 5. Advertisement for sale of New Brighton Estate, 1886. The baths, lower right corner, connected by the private tramway, were a featured selling point. Courtesy of National Library of Australia: Huntley & Barnard, New Brighton Estate, Lady Robinson Beach.

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